

Time to return stranded Canadian

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In the late 1980s, Brian Mulroney went out on a limb, deciding to throw his political clout behind efforts to release Nelson Mandela from prison.

Such a movement had been gathering momentum for a time but it was Mulroney's intervention that helped prepare the way for the South African's release.

The world responded by praising Canada's record on human rights, seen in its efforts to fight for a man lost in a jail.

But Mulroney wasn't done.

After 27 years in prison, a freed Mandela was invited to address the Canadian Parliament in 1990, enhancing this country's reputation even further.

Jean Chretien followed up by making the South African icon an honorary Canadian citizen. A non-partisan effort amongst all parties had achieved remarkable results.

When Stephen Harper accredited the Dalai Lama by meeting with him in a 2007 visit to Canada, he was pummelled by the Chinese government and went through considerable discomfort for taking a stand that eventually led to international respect for this country.

With such seminal moments behind us, it is hard to understand why Canada's government permits one of its own citizens - Abousfian Abdelrazik - to languish in the Canadian embassy in Khartoum, Sudan, with no recourse for returning him home.

Abdelrazik had returned to Sudan to visit his ailing mother in 2003. Twice detained by the Sudanese government, then released without ever being charged, they found no fault in this Canadian citizen. Yet the Canadian government refused him the right to return.

Matters became more complicated when it was discovered that Canada might have played a role in his illegal detention.

Subsequently, CSIS and the RCMP cleared Abdelrazik of all charges. The Canadian government then promised him the necessary travel documents for his return if he could secure a return ticket home.

Canadians from across the country, including Stephen Lewis, donated the funds only to have the government change course at the last minute, demanding Abdelrazik get himself removed from the United Nations watch list - an impossible task for an innocent man locked in an embassy.

Parliamentarians from all opposition parties held a press conference, pleading with the government to bring home one of their own - an innocent citizen.

"The government has disclosed no reason to suspect he constitutes a security threat," former justice minister Irwin Cotler said. "In these circumstances, international law expressly allows for his return to Canada, and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms compels it. The government needs to bring Mr. Abdelrazik home."

Yet for 11 months he has sat forlorn, an innocent exile residing in a Canadian embassy.

Where is that spirit that worked diligently to free a South African with a challenging past but who had become a symbol of international hope?

Where is the Stephen Harper who faced down significant opposition to bring the Dalai Lama to Canada and welcome him with true Canadian generosity? The world watches and wonders what happened to that Canada - the one where both Conservative and Liberal prime ministers led us to a place of deep and international respect.

It is time for that Stephen Harper to show up; he's shown he's capable of it. And it's time for all Canadian citizens to bring home and enfold one of their own.